

Book Proposal: Introduction to Nonfiction Cinema

By Paul Arthur

Overview:

A primer on the significance and structural attributes of documentary and avant-garde films, the two main branches of nonfiction cinema (“non-industrial cinema” is a more accurate term but tends to breed confusion), this book is intended for general film readers, as a primary text in undergraduate courses devoted to historical or contemporary surveys of nonfiction film, and as a supplemental text for introductory film courses as well as courses on post-WWII American cinema. Although emphasis is placed on recent developments in American nonfiction, there will be ample reference to the history of nonfiction movements in Europe and elsewhere, plus detailed analyses of works from at least fifteen countries.

Opening and concluding chapters discuss the two modes as complimentary, often overlapping independent practices, situating their shared or divergent elements in relation to dominant tendencies in contemporary Hollywood and European art-house production. For purposes of clarity and flexibility of course application, the body of the book will treat each mode separately using mirroring formats in order to frame roughly the same set of issues in two main sections. Extensive user-friendly back matter will include a glossary of key terms (e.g. “lyrical avant-garde,” “Structural film,” “cinema verite,” “essay film”), historical timeline of cinematic/social landmarks, annotated bibliography (including a guide to a growing defile of specialized periodicals), sample film production budgets (showing how selected films were financed, completed, and distributed) and a list of available resources for film rentals and DVD/VHS sales.

Rationale:

Putting it bluntly, there is no book remotely like the one I am proposing. To be sure, there are several useful, if now outdated, histories of international documentary (Barnouw; Barsam) and two superb accounts of the American avant-garde (Sitney; James). In addition, several recent books (Nichols; Bruzzi) claim to offer broad analyses of the aesthetic-ideological underpinnings of documentary yet despite their various merits, the style of presentation in both cases is, in my opinion, pitched too high for first-year or non-major undergrads—and of course, neither deals specifically with the avant-garde (although to his credit, Bill Nichols has consistently addressed the relevance of experimental work to nonfiction). When leading textbook authors such as Bordwell/Thompson try to direct their readers to supplemental materials on non-mainstream movements, their annotations betray a lack of clear-cut choices. At the very least, my book will fill this void.

From a larger perspective of contemporary movie culture, the need for a volume combining documentary and avant-garde is becoming ever more obvious, and urgent. As career teachers know only too well, beginning students often fail to grasp the usefulness of studying unfamiliar, “weird” cinematic forms unless they are shown to be precursors or offshoots of conventional Hollywood product. Such attitudes are, thankfully, changing as younger viewers, fresh from reality programming on TV, plunk down money for the newly-viable entertainments of *March of the Penguins* or *Murderball*. In a similar vein,

their tolerance for movies featuring an unusual quotient of non-narrative cues has expanded in an era of “abstract” music videos, Japanese anime, and certain types of videogames. There are of course still pockets of classroom resistance but a general academic drift of documentary and avant-garde idioms from the margins toward the center is undeniable. Following David James, I will be at pains to “de-ghettoize” nonfiction, elucidating its longstanding, if often disavowed, reciprocal relations to dominant filmmaking—among many other markers, consider the increasing number of Hollywood directors (e.g. Demme, Lee, Scorsese) who venture regularly into doc territory and the surprising conduit between avant-garde and mainstream indie projects (e.g. Haynes, Potter, Akerman, Van Sant).

Introduction to Nonfiction Cinema takes a broad, four-pronged approach to illuminating an admittedly disparate field of inquiry: aesthetic, historical, generic, and institutional. While the first two discursive categories follow established models of focus and presentation, the latter terms are relatively unexplored by extant literature on nonfiction cinema. In my book *A Line Of Sight* (Minnesota, 2005), I argue for a group of generic templates such as portraiture and the City Symphony as an alternative means of limning the development of the postwar American avant-garde. By the same token, my numerous writings on documentary have either helped define or actually coin such vital contemporary practices as the essay film, tabloid doc, and making-of. Students already equipped with a basic idea of what a genre is, and who study the concept as applied to classical Hollywood movies, should find in my generic approach both a fresh way of making sense of nonfiction cinemas and a framework for further experiencing the pleasure in individual works.

While analysis of institutional conditions in Hollywood studios is now a respected arena in contemporary media studies, it is virtually unknown in discussions of non-mainstream cinemas. Once again, following critical strategies I helped formulate in *A Line of Sight*, the proposed volume informs readers about the specific conditions or social dynamics by which documentaries and avant-garde films operate: how they are financed, produced, exhibited, and publicized; why certain filmmakers emerge as critical or audience favorites; how certain filmic domains are marginalized by corporate control of mass media. Indeed, rather than base distinctions between nonfiction and industry modes on notions like “objectivity” or, alternatively, “formal innovation,” the quiddity of nonfiction in my account will be predicated on material and social conditions of possibility. From infotainment as well as academic study, students know something about the gigantic costs and offscreen hassles surrounding blockbuster movies; in the absence of explicit guidance, they seem to assume that documentaries derive from “low-budget” versions of the same process or that the material setting of avant-garde production resembles that of home movies. To rehearse, without technical jargon about F-stops or micro-economic distribution deals, the ways in these modes of cinema come into (public) being is, I feel, a valuable and heretofore unsounded lesson—one that paradoxically aids students in understanding the wider compass of “conventional” cinematic expression and the hegemonic forces at work behind offerings at the local multiplex.

Method and Style:

The ideal for this volume is a balance between general cultural propositions and detailed descriptions/analyses of individual films. Reference to large groups of film titles comprising a specific genre or formal or historical tendency will be offset by brief case studies of key achievements in each nonfiction category. Special recognition will be given to such figures as Warhol, Brakhage, Mekas, Jennings, McElwee, and Jonathan Caouette who have in some sense bridge the gap between nonfiction modes. The style of writing will be adapted from the accessible yet precise critiques I have been writing for “crossover” magazines like *Film Comment* and *Cineaste*. I intend to summarize in plain language crucial theoretical controversies that have roiled both fields—e.g. the problem of “veracity,” the inevitability of the subjective—without relying on the application of film-theoretical grids. That said, I will provide plentiful signposts to a range of appropriate critical-historical texts, including writings and interviews by filmmakers themselves.

Chapter Outline (ten chapters of fifteen pages each plus back matter; approximately 175 pages total).

Introduction: What is Nonfiction Cinema and Why is it Important?

- A. Definitions and links between non-mainstream and industrial movie production
- B. Debunking myths:
 - 1. Documentary: content-driven lack of visual style; the trap of objectivity and burdens of social “edification.”
 - 2. Avant-Garde: the idea of “art for art sake” and consequent absence of social content; disinterest in viewer “pleasure”
- C. Distinguishing modes of production and technological/social functions
- D. Commonalities and mainstream appropriations
 - 1. What the avant-garde and documentary share in themes and working methods and where they diverge
 - 2. Hollywood’s “secret” romance with the avant-garde and its wholesale incorporation of cinema verite styles. Hybridity in recent fiction films.

Part One: Documentary

- Chapter One: Institutional Patterns in Documentary Production and Circulation
- Chapter Two: A Brief History of Documentary Cinema
- Chapter Three: Documentary Genres
- Chapter Four: Aesthetic Issues in Documentary Cinema

Part Two: Avant-Garde

- Chapter One: Institutional Patterns in Documentary Production and Circulation
- Chapter Two: A Brief History of Avant-Garde Cinema
- Chapter Three: Avant-Garde Genres
- Chapter Four: Aesthetic Issues in Avant-Garde Cinema

Conclusion: The State of Things and Future Prospects

- A. Documentaries, TV news, and reality programming
- B. What MTV learned from Stan Brakhage
- C. Eroding boundaries between modes and styles
- D. Minority voices in non-mainstream films

Back Matter: (see above)

